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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000265

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/15/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER

SUBJECT: PRT/KHOST: BOMBINGS IN KHOST TARGET CIVILIANS; NEW TACTIC AIMED AT "ANTI-ISLAMIC" ACTIVITIES

REF: ISLAMABAD 0498

Classified By: A/DCM ANGUS SIMMONS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1 C) Summary: Two blasts ripped through shops in downtown Khost on January 14, killing three and wounding 38. The attacks, coming just after the Eid holiday, seem to have targeted a gambling hall and a shop selling DVDs in the Khost Bazaar area. Khost Governor Pathan is convinced that bombings were the work of the Haqqani Network, headed by Siraj Haqqani, operating out of Miram Shah in Pakistan's North Waziristan. He believes that Haqqani's group is under increasing pressure from Pakistan's military factions in Waziristan and would use these attacks to strike fear and burnish its image as a defender of Islam. End Summary.

Two Bombs Hit Khost Bazaar

2 C) A large explosion rocked the eastern Afghan city of Khost at about 2:30 in the afternoon of January 14, followed thirty minutes later by a second blast 300 meters away. The first blast hit a gambling hall a block away from the Governor's Compound, killing three and injuring scores of others. The number of people gathered in a very confined space seems to have greatly increased the lethality of the blast. Khost Governor Pathan told us that he thought that the bomb was hidden in a basket of eggs left in the gambling hall. Egg fights (knocking eggs together, man holding first egg to break loses) are apparently a gambling event among Pashtun men, and were condemned by conservative Muslims as non-Islamic. At least one man died soon after the explosion but up to six more were critically wounded.

3 C) Thirty minutes later a second explosion demolished a shop 300 meters from the initial blast, still in the central bazaar area. The second bomb (according to Pathan a rigged propane tank left near shop by a customer) wounded two other people. The shop was in an area of the bazaar that sold DVDs and similar media.

Victims Strain Local Resources

4 C) The number of victims quickly overwhelmed Khost Hospital and a dozen of the victims were transported to the U.S. military hospital in FOB Salerno, several kilometers north east of Khost City. According to the Khost Director of Public Health, there were 40 casualties from the two attacks. Khost hospital and two private clinics were able to accommodate most with serious injuries but the worst cases were sent to the U.S. military hospital for treatment. Most of the victims appear to have been men in their thirties and forties but one child was seriously burned.

Culprit: Haqqani Network

5 C) Governor Pathan, escorted by the Khost PRT Commander, arrived at FOB Salerno in the early evening and visited the wounded. He told Salerno's Deputy Commander that he believed that the attacks were the work of the Haqqani network operating out of Pakistan. He said that recent Pakistan actions in Haqqani's current haven in Northern Waziristan had made life very difficult and that Haqqani's network was trying to sow fear in his home province of Khost. He reported that there had been night letters and, he believed, a serious threat of an attack during the recently-completed Eid holiday. He said that he did not believe the attacks were aimed at individuals, rather that Haqqani was striking at targets that he could characterize as anti-Islamic and indicative of the corrupting influence of Western media on Afghanistan's conservative brand of Islam.

6 C) The Haqqani Network, nominally headed by Jalaladdin Haqqani but in practice commanded by his son, Siraj, is the principal author of attacks against Coalition and Afghan Security Forces in the Khost and northern Paktika Area. The elder Haqqani was a mujaheddin commander in the Khost area during the war against the Soviets and later was the Taliban's Minister of Tribal and Frontier Affairs. His tribal connections through the powerful Zadran tribe allow him to command influence in hill areas along Khost's border with Paktia province. He is strongly focused on regaining influence in his home province. Some of the elder Haqqani's contemporaries have problems with Siraj's leadership but he still looks most in line to assume control of the network.

Comment

7 C) Haqqani in the past has directed his energies on attacking Coalition and GOA targets, so the mass casualty attack against innocent bystanders is unusual for Khost. However, it appears to be consistent with what we understand is an emerging pattern across the border in Pakistan's North and South Waziristan, where neo-Taliban have used violence to enforce their views of sharia law, and are publicly posturing as the restorers of order and Islamic values (reftel).
NORLAND